

The Printing House of Hell

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A Note in Reply to Joachim Hirsch Joachim's comments on the book have a special significance for me. For many years now (since 1975?) I have found that one of the greatest theoretical challenges has been to try and think against-and-beyond Joachim. I can think of no higher compliment. For that, and for his comments on the book, I am enormously grateful.

I Writing from Hell: Corrosive Criticism

I take my stance in the printing house of hell. Joachim Hirsch does not. That is the difference between us.

In the printing house of hell, according to William Blake, the devils print "in the infernal method, using corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid". (Blake 1793/1988, 39) The Scream with which my book starts is a scream from hell. It introduces a negative grammar, a theoretical movement-against which aims to corrode, to destroy "all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being" (MECW 3, 182): this, with the aim of displaying the infinite which was hid, the social power of human doing.

The movement of theory is negative, corrosive, destructive. Marx is an acid which destroys all fixed concepts, never-endingly. In a society which is based on the negation of the social power of human doing, any theory which aims to affirm that creative social power can only be negative, negating the negation of our social doing. The negative, corrosive, infernal movement of theory is at the same time the theoretical emancipation of human doing. The melting away of the apparent (fetishised) surfaces is immediately and directly the displaying of the infinite which was hid (the creative power of social doing). There is no middle term between corrosion and displaying the infinite. There is nothing that needs to be added on to the negative movement of theory. There is no "but also".

My argument may seem extreme, intolerant, simplistic ("recht pauschalisierend", as Joachim puts it). It is not at all. Let us go through it more gently.

I take it as a starting point that we want to destroy capitalism. I accept that reforms can be achieved within the capitalist system, but nothing that can seriously impede the constant destroying aggression that the existence of capitalism means. Theory, then, is part of the struggle to destroy capitalism. The starting point of theory is a scream against capitalism. The theoretical challenge is to elaborate that scream. I assume that Joachim shares this starting point.

Capitalism is not a thing, not a system, but a form of social relations, a historically specific form of organising the relations between people. It is a form of social relations which de-humanises. It de-humanises, but this does not mean that it deprives some essential trans-historical human of her humanity. Why Joachim accuses me of this when the book argues very clearly to the contrary, is not very clear to me. Humans are social, historical subjects, the „Ensemble der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse“, as Hirsch points out. Nevertheless, we can say that capitalism dehumanises us, in the sense that it is a process of depriving us of the unity of purpose and action which distinguishes us from animals. In other words, capitalism negates human social self-determination. The determining forces in human history appear not as human action (social doing) but as things (money, capital, the state) and, as a corollary, de-socialised humans (George Bush, the Hollywood subject). This process of dehumanisation is referred to by Marx as fetishism or alienation.

The struggle to destroy capitalism is the struggle to destroy de-humanisation, to create a society based on human self-determination, on the recognition of social human subjectivity. Theoretically, this means a struggle against all those categories which negate social subjectivity, social doing, social self-determination, an attack on all those categories that replace people-doers by things. This is the struggle from hell, the struggle to corrode the apparent surfaces which deny the centrality of social doing, which negate social self-determination.

To corrode the apparent surfaces, the fetishised forms which negate social doing, is at the same time immediately to display the infinity which is hid. To negate the negation of social doing is to emancipate the social doing which is negated. The corrosion of surfaces is the “aspiration towards totality” of which Lukács speaks. To criticise is to recompose theoretically the broken connections of the social flow of doing, to emancipate what the young Marx calls the species-being of Man. When the older Marx criticises value, he emancipates theoretically the work which creates value but is negated by it.

To emancipate means here to construct, to release a potential, not an essence. What is displayed when one criticises is doing, the subject. Not the pure subject, but the self-antagonistic subject, self-antagonistic doing, the doing which creates its own negation. When Marx criticises value, he discovers not pure work, but the dual (and self-antagonistic) existence of human doing as concrete and abstract labour. There is no pure subject, but that does not condemn us to inaction, nor does it entrap us within an endless circularity of power. We are part of the self-antagonistic subject, and we take sides in this antagonism, theoretically and practically, for the emancipation of (construction of) a self-determining social doing. The struggle against capitalism is always contradictory, which is precisely why it can only be conceived as constantly corrosive anti-fetishisation, critical and self-critical, criticising both the alienated object and the subject who produces that alienated object. It is precisely because of the depth of the self-antagonism, the depth to which capital penetrates us, that criticism attacks everything and continues forever, corroding everything that negates the creative power of social doing.

Criticism moves corrosively, eating into fetishised forms, always moving against the fetishism which never ceases to encroach. Marx criticised above all the categories of political economy, but his method takes us on to the criticism of the categories of politics, of law, of sociology, the criticism of all social forms which negate the power of social doing. Criticism corrodes all separation of being from doing, of existence from constitution, burns into the homogenisation of time, eats into duration, destroys identity. Probably, it pushes us on towards the criticism of all nouns and their dissolution into verbs, in a constant struggle to affirm (recover, construct) the social self-determination of human doing.

II Burning revolutionary holes

The infernal method of criticism corresponds to a certain understanding of revolution. Revolutionary practice is burning holes in the rule of things, tearing holes in capitalism. I find it difficult to imagine revolution in any other way.

Tearing holes in capitalism is not an abstract fantasy. We do it all the time. We scream, we kiss, we dream. Individually and collectively, we say No to the imposition of capital, in the factory, in the office, in the streets, at home. We get together with others to create alternative spaces, time-spaces in which we say "No, here no, here capital does not rule! Here we shall determine our own doing." We do that at work, in seminars, in social centres, in the Lacandon Jungle, in Buenos Aires. We rebel. Rebellion is a central element of everyday life. Whether we are in work or out of work, there are a million ways in which we say "wir wollen nicht mitmachen, wir machen nicht mit."

The revulsion between capital and ourselves is mutual. On an ever vaster scale, capital is expelling people, telling them that they are of no use to capital, forcing them to try and find other ways of surviving. And, when they are not actually expelled, the constant threat of being expelled is more present than ever.

These mutual revulsions come together and the problem is how to make this fruitful. People say No to capital and capital says no to people and makes the No to capital stronger.

We rebel, but rebellion is not enough. We say No, but the problem is how to make the No grow louder, how to articulate the Noes. Rebellion is the starting point, but the issue is not rebellion but revolution, how rebellion can blossom into revolution. The No is a hole in capitalism (yes, highly self-contradictory, of course, but the only possible starting point). How do we start from that hole and make it bigger and bigger. How do we move out, aspire towards totality? The strengthening of the No is the movement of corrosion, the corrosion of all those forms and categories which negate the No, which promote the reconciliation of the No with capital. The strengthening of the No is the theoretical-practical movement from hell.

I find it hard to think of revolution other than as the tearing of holes in capitalism and their progressive extension. Even concepts of revolution which understand revolution in terms of the taking of state power are merely seeking to create holes in the fabric of capitalist rule. Their weakness is two-fold. Firstly, they often base themselves on an absurd and unsustainable idea of a false totality, the idea that society and state are co-terminous, that society is contained within the boundaries of the state. And secondly, and more fundamentally, by focussing on the state, they channel the No into forms which have been created as a means of reconciling the No with the rule of capital. They shape the No into a hole which has already been pre-structured by capital. Here indeed see Foucault and his excellent criticism of popular tribunals: ref. They pour rebellion into the mould of reconciliation.

Fetishism is the jungle which constantly encroaches (from within and without) upon the rebellions and smothers them. Critical theory is the machete which hacks at that jungle.

Here too, it is a question of pushing forward, of posing and re-posing through experiment the anguished question of how we can extend the clearings in the jungle, of how we can break with capitalism, of how we can transform rebellion (ever present) into revolution (desperately urgent).

III But also? In reply to Joachim Hirsch

The aim of this note, it should be clear, is not to defend my book, *Change the World without taking Power*, against Joachim Hirsch's criticisms. I am quite happy to accept that the book has deficiencies, that I should have devoted more space to the discussion of Foucault, Gramsci, regulation theory, the study of particular struggles, whatever, even Althusser and Poulantzas. That is not the important point. What is important is rather that behind the particular criticisms lies a difference in our understanding of what Marxist or revolutionary theory should try to do. In this note my aim is to try to make this difference more explicit, in order to open up the fruitful debate that both he and I would like to see.

The main issue can be seen as being "but also". Joachim would perhaps agree with most of the previous argument, although without using the same language, but he would then add a "but also". He recognises the importance of critique, but seeks to complement it with positive analysis. He does not see critique as being immediately emancipatory, but looks for intermediate categories, ways of theorising that which exists. Thus, he says, in one of the central sentences of his commentary, "Der Appell an die Negation, den Bruch mit dem Bestehenden, an das Nicht- mehr- mitmachen ist zweifellos wichtig, wird allerdings politisch weitertreibend nur, wenn er theoretisch mit einer genauen Analyse der sich verändernden Reproduktionsformen des Kapitalismus, seiner historischen Formveränderungen verbunden wird, also dem, was Holloway recht pauschalisierend als die bestehenden Verhältnisse legitimierende Theorie denunziert." This is, I think, an accurate statement of Joachim's approach. He combines a negative critique with "einer genauen Analyse der sich verändernden Reproduktionsformen des Kapitalismus". That has been a characteristic feature of his work for years.

This comment seems sensible and correct. We need critical theory, of course, but also we need an exact analysis of capitalist development. On reflection, however, the apparently-so-clearly-correct sentence dissolves into meaninglessness. What does "eine genaue Analyse der sich verändernden Reproduktionsformen des Kapitalismus" mean? How can we complement negative criticism with an exact analysis of the changing forms of reproduction of capitalism? Negative criticism confronts the categories of social thought and seeks to show that they are fetishised categories, categories that conceal the power of social doing. Negative theory seeks to open those categories, to display that which lies hid. If we use those categories without opening them (as the basis of the exact analysis), we are not complementing the negative critique, but denying it, playing an active part in the closure of the category. And if we are consistent and insist on opening the categories, then no "exact analysis of the changing forms of capitalist reproduction" is possible. That which seems so sensible (the combination of exact analysis and negative critique) is in fact senseless.

Many of the criticisms that have been made (not just by Joachim) of the book take the form of "yes, the discussion of fetishism and critique is very good, but also..." But there is no "but also". Revolutionary theory is nothing but criticism, a movement of corrosion straight from hell. Class struggle is the movement of fetishism and against fetishism. There is nothing outside that.

The idea of a "but also" implies that there are some scientific categories beyond criticism. Critical theory says, "Social relations exist in the form of relations between things: science is the critique of these forms". What room is there for a "but also"? Either we take the fetishised categories as they present themselves, in which case our "exact analysis" is neither scientific nor exact; or we criticise those categories in order to discover the antagonistic suppression of social doing which those categories conceal, in which case our analysis is scientific, but still not exact. There are no intermediate categories, nothing between that which reproduces fetishism and that which criticises it. So this "but also" is nothing but a game, an immunisation strategy, a polite way of saying "yes, I

read your argument, but I don't understand it, and in any case I don't take it seriously."

That Joachim should want to use the immunisation strategy of "but also" is understandable, because the argument of the book is, of course, directed against him, among others. Most Marxist theorists live precisely in the realm of the "but also", which is why the book is (or should be) an abomination to them. The terrible thing is that the "but also" inevitably fortifies that which we all want to destroy because it bases itself upon the fetishes, the real-illusions of capitalism.

The "but also" comes of course with names attached: a good discussion of fetishism, but also you should have added a little bit of those who say the opposite: Gramsci, Althusser, Poulantzas, regulation theory, a little bit of this, a little bit of that. Yet the problem is precisely the opposite: how do we fine-comb our theory, how do we write straight from hell, how do we make our argument clear?

Perhaps the sharpest sting of the attack on this but also is the criticism of the paradigmatic approach. In the book, this criticism is turned in particular against the recent book by Hardt and Negri but it obviously applies equally to Joachim Hirsch and to all those who theorise capitalism through the prism of phases such as "Fordism", "Post-Fordism" and so on. And of course to the whole tradition of Marxist analysis: Marxists have always sought to understand "the current phase of capitalist development" - Joachim's work in this direction is just far more sophisticated and stimulating than most. Again, it seems obviously correct: of course we want to know what the current phase of capitalist development is, so that we can understand what is happening and think our strategies accordingly.

And yet no. Firstly, to analyse the phases of capitalist development is to tell the story from above, the story of domination, when our task is surely to open up domination, to show how the movement of domination is the movement of its dependence upon us, upon the transformation of our doing into exploitable labour. And secondly, and crucially, to speak of a phase (or paradigm) of capitalist development is already to project the existence of capitalism into the future, to give it a duration and a normality, when our theory should move in the opposite direction, showing that capitalism will exist tomorrow only if we create it tomorrow. Our problem is not to establish the normality of rule, but to break it. The issue is not to destroy capitalism so much as to stop producing it.

But then how do we talk about what is happening in the world, about US aggression against Iraq, say? By telling it from below, in terms of the movement of capital's dependence upon us, and its flight from that dependence. Analysis (and history) cannot be seen as being separate from criticism, they cannot be a but also. Analysis and history must be seen as part of the movement of criticism, part of the constant effort to recover the "true sun" of human doing in a world which constantly denies it. But, if we accept that it is often difficult to narrate (without over-simplifying) the world in terms of the strength of our own doing, do we not need some intermediate account, that takes us in that direction? Perhaps we do, but then the account is a definition which negates itself, which points to its own overcoming. It is not an exact analysis, and should not present itself as such. And it should not assume that the existence of capitalism tomorrow would be something normal, but should rather try to articulate horror and astonishment at the possibility that we may tomorrow recreate the oppression that destroys us. Absurd perhaps, but no more absurd than revolution, and that is what it is all about. Without that astonishment, revolution is impossible.

The but also is political as well as theoretical. The critics of the book who say that fetishism is of course important, but also, tend to argue that of course anti-institutional struggles are important, but also ... control of the state is important. In Joachim's case, the but also points to an inevitable permanence of fetishisation: "Die Frage, ob und in welcher Weise eine differenzierte und freie Gesellschaft objektiver Formen, d.h. in der Tat einer spezifischen Versachlichung bedarf, dass es

also möglicherweise darauf ankäme, diese nicht einfach abzuschaffen, sondern bewusst mit ihnen umzugehen, Fetischisierung also sozusagen im Hegelschen Sinne "aufzuheben", wird nicht gestellt."

The problem with the but also, both theoretically and politically, is that it conceals a contradiction, in the guise of a simple conjunction. Thus, theoretically, criticism of fetishism is important, but also exact analysis on the basis of fetishised categories is important. Practically, anti-state struggle is important, but also institutional struggle is important (and the recognition of the inevitable permanence of fetishised institutions). But no: analysis on the basis of fetishised categories fetishises, and institutional struggle institutionalises struggle. There is an antagonism here that the but also just sweeps under the carpet. And in practice, what gets swept under the carpet is not just the antagonism, but the first part of the sentence, that which is graciously conceded to be important (criticism, anti-institutional struggle).

Obviously, this is not an argument for avoiding all contact with the state, or with money, or with other capitalist forms of social relations. These can be no more avoided than our thought can avoid fetishised categories. The problem is the how of the contact. The problem is how to confront these relations and these categories with dignity, how to confront them critically, in theory and in practice.

IV Conclusion: A Proverb from Hell

I am aware that I have not answered all of Joachim Hirsch's criticisms in this note. That has not been my aim. My aim has rather been to draw out what I see as being the main difference in our approach. I have tried to do this as sharply as I can. This is not because I have the correct line: theory, as well as practice, is necessarily experimental, a question, part of the struggle to create a different but unknown world. Joachim is part of the same struggle. Within that struggle we should adopt as our motto one of Blake's Proverbs of Hell: opposition is true friendship. I apologise to Joachim and to other readers for not including a full discussion of eighteenth century English poetry.

P.S.

* <http://libcom.org/library/printing-house-hell-john-holloway>